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Why are you talking like that, sir? Il-Limbi, phonology and class in contemporary Egypt

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Abstract

This article investigates the phonological patternings in the speech of il-Limbi, an immensely popular character in Egyptian comedy; and it stands therefore at a crossroads between cultural studies and linguistics. Il-Limbi represents the urban working classes, and his speech often mocks social conventions through ludicrous parody of educated speech. Masquerading as socially superior personas, his speech highlights the diglossic situation in Egypt as well as the pretentious use of English into the elite register. My examination of il-Limbi's pronunciation in four movies reveals a number of systematic patterns in both consonants and vowels, which construct a unique code. This code is based partly on exaggerated features of Cairene Arabic and partly on genuine features of illiterate, lower-class vernacular. And it is often the interplay between various registers via correspondence rules that creates humor in the films.

Keywords : Egyptian comedy, il-Limbi, vernacular Cairene Arabic, illiterate speech, phonology

Résumé

Cet article examine les caractères phonologiques du discours d'il-Limbi, un personnage extrêmement populaire dans la comédie égyptienne. Il se situe donc au croisement des études culturelles et linguistiques. Il-Limbi représente la classe ouvrière urbaine et son discours se moque souvent des conventions sociales par une parodie grotesque de discours éduqué. Se faisant passer pour des personnages socialement supérieurs, son discours met en évidence la situation de diglossie en Égypte, ainsi que l'utilisation prétentieuse de l'anglais dans le registre des élites. Mon examen de la prononciation d'il-Limbi dans quatre films révèle un certain nombre de schémas systématiques dans les consonnes et les voyelles, qui construisent un code unique. Ce code est basé en partie sur des caractéristiques exacerbées de l'arabe cairote et en partie sur de variées spécificités de la langue vernaculaire analphabète des classes inférieures. C'est souvent l'interaction entre différents registres via des règles de correspondance qui crée alors l'humour dans les films.

Mots clés : Comédie égyptienne, il-Limbi, arabe vernaculaire du Caire, discours illettré, phonologie

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1. Introduction

Il-Limbi is a hugely popular character in Egyptian comedy and pop culture played by actor Muḥammad Sa'd (1968-).¹ The character was first introduced through a secondary role in *al-Nāẓir* 'The school principal' (2000),² where it was so successful that it nearly overshadowed the leading role. Only two years later, Sa'd reintroduced il-Limbi as the protagonist of a movie with the same name, which has been heralded as a landmark in Egyptian film history. *Il-Limbi* (2002)³ was shortly followed by the second instalment *Illi Bāli Bālak* 'You know what I mean' (2003).⁴ Then, after a series of films depicting Sa'd in slightly different roles and settings, il-Limbi reappeared in *il-Limbi 8 Gīgā* 'il-Limbi 8-gigabyte RAM' (2010)⁵ in which Sa'd himself contributed to the screenplay, and more recently in the TV series *Fīfa 'Aṭāṭa* (2014).⁶

The popularity of the films stems partly from the audience's identification with il-Limbi's personality. Il-Limbi is present – somewhat realistically – in present-day Egyptian society.⁷ Sa'd announced in various interviews that he modeled the persona after some real-life il-Limbis from his old Cairo neighborhood *al-Sayyida Zaynab*. He also claimed that there is a hidden il-Limbi in every Egyptian man.⁸ Obviously, il-Limbi represents the marginalized man – impoverished, downtrodden, and constantly frustrated – that many of his viewers can identify with. In a way, he is the cinematic embodiment of Egypt's set of growing social problems, namely unemployment, corruption, and a stark class divide that he parodies through his disorderly speech and deviant behavior.⁹ And even when he tries to project himself as a bully, he comes across as chivalrous and kind-hearted most of the time. One can rightfully describe him as "an intensely local Everyman" whose desperate efforts to survive and eventual success in the plot create an extraordinary rapport with the audience.¹⁰ Another fitting description is *baladī*, a term commonly, but problematically, translated as "local"; where the translation itself has recently made its way as a loanword into the dialect, *lōkal* – a comic equivalent of *baladī*, meant as a demeaning insult. Il-Limbi is unduly *lōkal*.

Il-Limbi's name derives from General Edmund Allenby (1861–1936), the British High Commissioner of Egypt and Sudan between 1919 and 1925, whose much-hated, tyrannical image inspired the famous "burning of il-Limbi" festival of Port Said during Šamm al-Nasīm.¹¹ Quite logically, the effigy burning symbolized an unwavering rejection of British occupation and political dominance; and as it became ritual, Allenby's identity became blurry, and he was

¹ For transcriptions of proper nouns pronounced in a colloquial way, we follow the conventions of Cairene Arabic phonology, hence *il-Limbi* rather than *al-Limbī*, etc.

² Dir. Šarīf 'Arafa, screenplay Šarīf 'Arafa, Aḥmad 'Abdallāh (dialogue), 2000.

³ Dir. Wā'il Iḥsān, screenplay Aḥmad 'Abdallāh, 2002.

⁴ Dir. Wā'il Iḥsān, screenplay Nādir Šalāḥ al-Dīn, 2003.

⁵ Dir. Ašraf Fāyiq, screenplay Nādir Šalāḥ al-Dīn and Muḥammad Sa'd, 2010.

⁶ Dir. Sāmiḥ 'Abdul 'Azīz, screenplay Muḥammad Nabawī and Sāmiḥ Sīrr-al-Ḥatm, 2014.

⁷ van Eynde, Koen. 2011. "Mohamed 'el-Limby' Saad and the Popularization of a Masculine Code", *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 4/1, p. 1-25.

⁸ Fārūq, Aḥmad. 2010. "Muḥammad Sa'd: Lan atanāzal 'an il-Limbi", *Al-Shorouk* (7 July 2010).

⁹ Hamam, Iman. 2012. "Disarticulating Arab Popular Culture", in *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field*, ed. Tarik Sabry. London, I.B. Tauris, p. 186-213.

¹⁰ Mustafa, Hani. 2007. "A Grotesque Cacophony", *Al-Ahram Weekly* (23-29 August 2007).

¹¹ Belli, Mériam N. 2013. "When Edmund Allenby became al-Limby", *An Uncurable Past, Nasser's Egypt Then and Now*. Gainesville, University Press of Florida, p. 85-104.

eventually transformed into “il-Limbi”. Although it is difficult to find a resemblance, beyond the name, between il-Limbi and Lord Allenby, one can point out a broad connection between the fictional role and the wild and transgressive behavior linked to the popular festival (about which political authorities have expressed repeated concerns). In addition, as the ceremony has traditionally centered in the working-class neighborhood in Port Said (al-‘Arab), it asserted the national identity of this social class “not only against the colonizer but also against estranged native elites, spatially and culturally divorced from them, whom they associated with the occupiers and profiteers”.¹² This social dimension has an obvious link to the *baladī* aspect of il-Limbi’s character, as well as to his derision of middle-class speech and way of life in general.

In his first appearance, it was Muḥammad Sa’d who proposed to the director the specific style of il-Limbi’s character: a drugged-out, uneducated man with a speech disorder, who is foolishly inarticulate and yet childishly expressive.¹³ *Al-Nāẓir* portrays him as a street-smart hooligan (ṣāyi‘) sought out by his former schoolmate, Ṣalāḥ, for advice on becoming a toughie. Il-Limbi offers him a crash course, which he tops with urban slang phrases to help Ṣalāḥ perfect his streetwise performance. The basic character does not change much in *il-Limbi*; but now that the entire plot is built around it, Sa’d has the space to develop a sophisticated code with somewhat clearly defined pronunciation attributes, which I will dub “Limbi Arabic”.

This code is taken a step further in the other two movies, where the character assumes more complex roles. In *Illi Bāli Bālak*, il-Limbi escapes from jail, and while being chased by his clone prison warden Riyād al-Manfalūṭī, the two end up in a car crash. After waking up in the operation room, he is told that his brain was placed in the warden’s body; and although he is convinced that he is still il-Limbi, he is pressured to take over the warden’s job, family, and entire life. This “body transplant” turns into a “computer-chip implant” scenario in *il-Limbi 8 Gīgā*. Here il-Limbi, after suffering a brain concussion, receives the chip as an experiment by a mad scientist-physician. It grants him super-memory powers, followed by incredible success at his job as a fraudulent lawyer. In impersonating a police officer or a lawyer, il-Limbi encounters numerous situations in which he has to use the linguistic register of higher social classes, full of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and foreign loans that he struggles to pronounce. As a result, we can study regularity not only in the conventional Limbi Arabic, but also in its loanword adaptation.

My analysis of Limbi Arabic is based on data from the above four movies: the debut movie *al-Nāẓir*, the landmark *il-Limbi*, and its two sequels *Illi Bāli Bālak* and *il-Limbi 8 Gīgā*.¹⁴ The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents general characteristics of Limbi Arabic, as well as meta-reference to language in the films. Section 3 examines and exemplifies consonant patterns of Limbi Arabic that divert from Educated Cairene Arabic (ECA), and Section 4 does the same for vowels. The conclusion, Section 5, sheds some light on how language is manipulated in pop culture productions.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 88.

¹³ van Eynde, “Mohamed ‘el-Limby’ Saad”, p. 2.

¹⁴ Roles like Būḥa and Katkūt which Sa’d portrayed in movies named after the main characters are only superficially similar to il-Limbi. Unlike him, they have non-urban backgrounds (provincial and Upper Egyptian), and they consequently have different linguistic profiles. That is why they are excluded from the present study.

2. Characteristics of Limbi Arabic

Our linguistic investigation of the Muḥammad Saʿd film series has limited significance if not placed in the wider frame of Egyptian pop culture productions. There is hardly a comedy, whether on film or from Ramaḍān comical TV series or even commercial advertisements in nowadays Egypt, that does not have language itself as its main subject. Metalinguistic references are pervasive: from the usual flaunting of affrication and palatalization of /t/ and /d/ in /i/ contexts (ti > tʃi and di > dʃi) as the epitome of *baladī* accent to mispronunciations of English loanwords found in the pretentious speech of the elite classes. The analysis of these references reveals that cultural productions have a complex and ambiguous relationship to language, its norms, and its margins. None the less, there has been little academic interest in studying this dimension. And although il-limbi's language has attracted the attention of some scholars,¹⁵ it was always treated as a marginal aspect of the persona. The present article is the first attempt to study il-limbi's speech exclusively, and its pronunciation (phonological) characteristics in particular.

Descriptions of il-Limbi's manner of speaking – full of stammering and mispronunciations – range from “coarse and unrefined” to “demented and distorted”. Some playful references to language in the films confirm that it is meant to be so. An important meta-reference occurs at the end of *il-Limbi*, when il-Limbi tries to converse with an overly anxious belly dancer at his wedding, to which she makes the following judgmental remarks on his pronunciation:

Inta ḥadritak bi-titkallim kida lē? Gihāz in-nuṭʿ andak ... yaʿni maḥārig alfāḏak miš ... ṭab fī duktōr funatiks kwayyis ʔawi¹⁶ ana aʿrafu. Iddīni il-īmēl adris bitāʿak wana abʿat-lak inwānu.

‘Why are you talking like that, sir? Your speech apparatus ... I mean, your articulations are not ... I actually know a very good speech therapist. Give me your email address and I’ll send you his address.’

The fact that il-Limbi is scorned by a belly dancer is very telling in itself. Belly dancers in films are usually depicted as models of *baladī* feminine speech; but here it is the dancer – despite with an unusual background – who refers to a speech therapist, using the foreign word “phonetics”. So language-wise, even *she* ranks above il-Limbi; and the scenarist seems to be quite aware of this issue. In the very last scene, for instance, we see il-Limbi standing next to a chalkboard and trying to teach his son the English alphabet, but he only offers a twisted arrangement of the letters with kitschy Arabic examples. Here it is *him* who voices the self-critical remarks, when he finally tells his son “Ignore this ‘language’ of mine. You have to be better [than that]”.

Both ‘tongue’ and ‘lip’ are used as allusions to pronunciation. The first when il-Limbi's fiancé in *il-Limbi*, played by actress Ḥala Šiḥa (1979-), picks on his deformed pronunciation of *bīr is-sillim* ‘stairwell’ as *bīr iz-zillim*, and comments “*zillim?! zillim?! You don’t need literacy classes; you deserve your tongue cut off instead*”. The second comes in *Illī Bāli Bālak* when, shortly after the body-transplant operation, il-Limbi stands in front of a mirror to check out

¹⁵ See, for example, the works by Iman Hamam and Koen van Eynde cited earlier in the article.

¹⁶ The subscript ʔ in the transliteration of this word, and similar words throughout the article, indicates a glottal rendition of etymological *qāf*, to be distinguished from an etymological *hamza* for which the symbol ʾ is used.

his face. He is immediately shocked and bursts out with “Have they cut my lip off or what? Where has my lip gone?”. Iman Hamam spots a clever link here between the “disappearance” of his lip and the transformation that takes place after the surgery, which “has to manifest itself on his person and the way he speaks”.¹⁷

Il-Limbi’s mispronunciations are so intense that one may entertain the idea that these are deliberate and meaningful distortions rather than a speech impediment – that they are jokes *about* language itself.¹⁸ On the one hand, Limbi Arabic highlights, and mocks, the diglossic situation in Egypt, where colloquial and standard varieties of Arabic coexist, more evidently in educated speech. In both *Illi Bāli Bālak* and *il-Limbi 8 Gīgā*, il-Limbi often runs into situations where he has to use the formal register by virtue of the new roles he is assuming, either the highly educated warden or lawyer. Whether he is delivering a speech to the human rights committee or addressing the court, he is obliged to use educated vocabulary which he frequently transforms into different, but still meaningful, words. So when the bolded words in (1) are contrasted with their high register counterparts on the right, the phrases acquire a humorous meaning. It is almost a parody of diglossia, where the jokes are borne out of the sharp distinction between the higher and lower registers of Cairene Arabic.

(1) Rendering ECA in Limbi Arabic

Limbi Arabic	Gloss	ECA	Gloss
hurū_q <i>il-insān</i>	‘human burns’	hu_qū_q	‘rights’
nizil ‘ <i>alayya l-waḥl</i>	‘mud came down on me’	waḥy	‘revelation’
bi-l-muḥtaṣar <i>il-muzīd</i>	‘short and prolonged’	il-mufīd	‘useful’
alṭaṣik <i>ma’a n-niyāba</i>	‘I stick with the prosecution’	attaṭiq	‘I agree’

Another target of humor in the films is the widespread use of English/foreign *gratuitous loans* into ECA. These are unadapted or little-integrated loanwords in free variation with indigenous synonyms that are borrowed for prestige rather than need.¹⁹ When il-Limbi feigns to be of a more socially privileged class – one that likes to project itself as bilingual and bicultural – he is likely to compensate by altering the way he speaks.²⁰ He does so by trying to adopt English words (with their authentic pronunciation) into his own speech, as *they* do, but of course he fails miserably – or maybe deliberately. The deviations, exemplified in (2), are often too farcical to count as mispronunciations. For ‘cashier’, he even produces the entirely different word *kawaḥfēr* ‘hair stylist’. So once again, it appears that the imposter is mocking what his class perceives as pretentious use of language by the socially superior classes.

(2) Rendering English in Limbi Arabic

<i>it-titils</i>	<i>id-ditēlz</i>	‘the details’	<i>’ubil</i>	<i>nubil</i>	‘Nobel’
<i>šubink</i>	<i>šubing</i>	‘shopping’	<i>dust</i>	<i>tust</i>	‘toast’
<i>il-kawaḥfēr</i>	<i>il-kašyēr</i>	‘the cashier’	<i>as you lite</i>	<i>as you like</i>	—

¹⁷ Hamam, “Disarticulating Arab Popular Culture”, p. 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 200.

¹⁹ See Hafez, Ola. 1996. “Phonological and Morphological Integration of Loanwords into Egyptian Arabic”, *Égypte/Monde arabe* 27-28, p. 383-410.

²⁰ Hamam, “Disarticulating Arab Popular Culture”, p. 199.

Limbi Arabic can be viewed as a linguistic code in its own right, which we can describe as the antithesis of ECA – the urban, cultivated (High) variety of Cairo. Or, based on Badawī's five levels of spoken Arabic in Egypt,²¹ it corresponds to the lowest, *'ammīyat al-'ummiyyīn* 'Illiterate Spoken Arabic', which is typically associated with socially underprivileged speakers. Alternatively, we can treat it as a distorted version of ECA. This does not mean, however, that it is "a system without order, but a system whose order is not in line with the normative one."²²

A noteworthy parallel to il-Limbi – one for which language also serves a key function – is the talk-show dummy Abla Fāhītā. Frédéric Lagrange provides an analysis of Fāhītā's speech: a unique code constructed on a blend of social, cross-generational, and personalized characteristics, with peculiarities that can only be appreciated by a native or experienced speaker of Cairene Arabic.²³ His analysis outlines Fāhītā's verbal quirks and insinuations, and a vocabulary that comprises a perplexing marriage of globalized and old-fashioned feminine talk. Fāhītā makes use of English borrowings, although at a much more sophisticated level than il-Limbi, and of MSA in some episodes. Her Standard Arabic is filled with errors, intentional or left without linguistic revision, and is heavily mixed with vernacular, as one would indeed expect from a character with her social background. This is echoed in il-Limbi's "mistreatment" of the standard variety in general, and more explicitly in the episodes of *il-Limbi fi zaman al-gāhiliyya* 'il-Limbi in pre-Islamic times'.²⁴

As part of his study, Frédéric Lagrange also lists some characteristic features of Abla Fāhītā's pronunciation, such as the near-absence of velarization, extreme *imāla* (vowel raising), excessive hissing of the sibilant /s/, lowering of /ū/ to /ō/, and complete lack of affrication.²⁵ In the same vein, the focus of the current study is to describe, exemplify, and explain phonological regularities in Limbi Arabic. One way of understanding its relation to the ECA system, which could potentially serve as its model, is to identify various types of patterns and processes by which it departs from that system. We start with those that involve consonants.

3. Consonant Patterns

Il-Limbi's consonant inventory is identical to that of ECA, except for its lack of the uvular stop /q/. This phoneme has a marginal status in ECA, as it is restricted mainly to classicisms, i.e. borrowings from MSA.²⁶ /q/ is arguably the most important single phonetic feature distinguishing educated speech,²⁷ although most uneducated speakers still retain it in a few words. In Limbi Arabic, /q/ is absent and replaced by a velar stop /k/ – more precisely by a velarized allophone thereof, viz. [k̠]. Examples like *ḥadīqa* for *ḥadīqa*, among others in (3), illustrate that this is a consistent aspect of il-Limbi's speech. And even beyond speech, we find that he

²¹ Badawī, Al-Sa'īd Muḥammad. 1973/2012. *Mustawayāt al-'arabiyya al-mu'āšira fi miṣr*. Cairo, Dār al-Salām.

²² See Wolfram, Walt and Robert Johnson. 1982. *Phonological Analysis: Focus on American English*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, p. 176.

²³ Lagrange, Frédéric. 2016. "Muqāraba luḡawiyya li-dumya waqīḥa", in *Al-'arabiyya 'ala maḥakk šabakāt al-tawāṣul*, eds. Aḥmad Bayḍūn and Manāl Ḥidr. Beirut, Ashkal Alwan, p. 139-177.

²⁴ Kitzler, Gisela. forthcoming. "Linguistic Misplacement as a Means of Creating Humor: The Case of the Popular Egyptian Movie al-Limbi fi zaman ig-gāhiliyya", *Proceedings of the 13th AIDA Conference*.

²⁵ Lagrange, "Muqāraba luḡawiyya", p. 150-151.

²⁶ Watson, Janet C.E. 2002. *The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 10.

²⁷ Mitchell, T.F. 1956. *Introduction to Egyptian Colloquial Arabic*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 5.

spells *qānūn* ‘law’ and *qānūniyya* ‘legal’ with the letter *kāf* on his professional poster in one of the first scenes of *il-Limbi 8 Gīgā*. The implication is that *il-Limbi* is unable to pronounce nor spell *qāf*.

(3) /k/ replacement for /q/

Limbi Arabic	MSA cognate	Gloss
<i>ḳiṭṭati</i>	<i>qiṭṭati</i>	‘my kitten’
<i>ik-ḳanā</i>	<i>al-qanā</i>	‘the channel’
<i>ik-ḳumbila</i>	<i>al-qumbila</i>	‘the bomb’
<i>sūr ḥadīḳa</i>	<i>sūr ḥadīqa</i>	‘a garden fence’
<i>ṭa‘na raḳīḳa</i>	<i>ṭa‘na raqīqa</i>	‘a gentle stab’
<i>al-ḥawḳu</i>	<i>al-ḥalqu</i>	‘the creation’

Another process is elision of the glide /y/ in both onset and coda positions. This is usually accompanied by compensatory lengthening in the tautosyllabic vowel: the following vowel when /y/ is an onset, and the preceding one when it is a coda. Elision of /y/ is generally a feature of uneducated speech in Egypt.

(4) Deletion of /y/

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
<i>inti nāma</i>	<i>inti nayma</i>	‘you are sleeping (F.SG.)’
<i>iṣ-ṣā‘a</i>	<i>iṣ-ṣiyā‘a</i>	‘the thuggery’
<i>bitt ā nūsa</i>	<i>bitt-i ya nūsa</i>	‘Nūsa girl! (VOC.)’
<i>ḳidir ibuhḥ-i m‘āk</i>	<i>ḳidir yibuhḥ-i m‘āk</i>	‘could assault you’

A third process is complete progressive assimilation of an alveolar rhotic /r/ to a preceding palato-alveolar fricative /š/, resulting in a geminate /šš/ output (5). Again, this is characteristic of less educated speakers in general.

(5) Assimilation of /r/ after /š/

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
<i>‘iššīn ginē</i>	<i>‘išrīn ginē</i>	‘twenty pounds’
<i>tiššab ḥamra</i>	<i>tišrab ḥamra</i>	‘you drink alcohol’
<i>aššaf</i>	<i>ašraf</i>	(male name)

Next is regressive voicing assimilation of sibilants, whereby the voiceless alveolar fricatives /s, ʃ, š/ become voiced /z, ʒ, ž/ respectively, when followed by a voiced obstruent either in the same word or across word boundaries. The same tendency is reported in ECA,²⁸ e.g. in *uzbū* ‘week’, *mazgūn* ‘imprisoned’, *yīžba* ‘he gets full’, *užbur* ‘be patient’, etc. However, whereas in ECA voicing assimilation does not take place before sonorants, or before the voiced pharyngeal /‘/, this is not the case in Limbi Arabic. In (6a) we see examples of voicing before /m/ and /‘/. Even more, /s, ʃ, š/ undergo voicing in inter-vocalic and post-vocalic/coda positions (6b), at least sometimes. Note how the output *il-mikrubāz* enables the listener to hear *bāz* ‘got spoiled’ and the audience laughs at the insinuation that the microbus is not properly working.

²⁸ See Watson, *The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic*, p. 245.

(6) Voicing of sibilants /s, ʃ, ʒ/

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
a. <i>nilmiz burg</i>	<i>nilmis burg</i>	‘we touch a tower’
<i>izbit inn</i>	<i>isbit inn</i>	‘prove that’
<i>miž biʿd</i>	<i>miš biʿd</i>	‘not far’
<i>izm-i ḥaḍritak</i>	<i>ism-i ḥaḍritak</i>	‘your name’
‘arabiyyit il-ʾizʾāf	‘arabiyyit il-ʾisʾāf	‘the ambulance car’
b. <i>ḥuzāra</i>	<i>ḥusāra</i>	‘what a loss!’
<i>bīr iz-zillim</i>	<i>bīr is-sillim</i>	‘the stairwell’
<i>illi biyžīl</i>	<i>illi biyšīl</i>	‘that carries’
‘al-azfalt	‘al-asfalt	‘on the asphalt’
<i>il-mikrubāz</i>	<i>il-mikrubāš</i>	‘the microbus’

One of the most predominant traits of Limbi Arabic is consonant mutation. Mutations where manner of articulation changes but place is preserved show a clear preference for nasal over oral sounds. As shown in (7a), a labial stop /b/ shifts to the corresponding nasal /m/, and an alveolar approximant /r, l/ shifts to an alveolar nasal /n/. The reverse pattern is also attested: a change in place of articulation occurs while manner is preserved. This place change usually takes the form of a labial-to-alveolar shift, e.g. a labial nasal /m/ to /n/ as in (7b). Note that alternations between /n/~m/, /n/~l/, and /b/~m/ are reported in (a low register of) Cairene Arabic,²⁹ although to a lesser extent, e.g. *banzīn* ~ *banzīm* ‘benzine’, *gurnān* ~ *gurnāl* ‘newspaper’, *banṭalōn* ~ *manṭalōn* ‘pants’, etc. Mutation occasionally gives rise to existing, but different, words, creating humor in the dialogue. An example is *maḥw il-ʾummiyya* ‘wiping out illiteracy’ turning into *naḥw il-ʾummiyya* ‘toward illiteracy’, which appears to be a befitting pun when we see il-Limbi cheating in the exam.

(7) Consonant mutation

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
a. <i>ḡašm-i ʾanni</i>	<i>ḡašb-i ʾanni</i>	‘against my will’
<i>ill-iḡtišām da</i>	<i>ill-iḡtišāb da</i>	‘this rape’
<i>fī manaḥīnak</i>	<i>fī manaḥīrak</i>	‘in your nose’
<i>biššana ʾa n-nabi</i>	<i>biššala ʾa n-nabi</i>	‘invoking the prophet’
<i>inḥaḡūni yanās</i>	<i>ilḥaḡūni yanās</i>	‘help me, folks!’
b. <i>yīnkin</i>	<i>yīmkin</i>	‘maybe’
<i>fī-n-nubayil</i>	<i>fī-l-mubayil</i>	‘on the mobile’
<i>lāzīm tisna ʾiḥa</i>	<i>lāzīm tisma ʾiḥa</i>	‘you (F.SG.) must hear it’
<i>naḥw il-ʾummiyya</i>	<i>maḥw il-ʾummiyya</i>	‘wiping out illiteracy’
<i>il-ʾunan</i>	<i>il-ʾumam</i>	‘the nations’

A trademark Limbi – and classic *šāyīʿ* – feature is the shift from voiceless guttural (pharyngeal or laryngeal) /ʔ, ḥ, h/ to the voiced pharyngeal /ʕ/, which is articulated with less friction. This *guttural lenition* applies to a target in pre-vocalic position in Limbi Arabic (8), whereby a poem, *ḡašīdit šīʾr*, turns into the hilarious *ʾašīdit šīʾr* ‘a gruel of poetry’, and the future tense

²⁹ Woidich, Manfred. 2006. *Das Kairenisch-Arabische: Eine Grammatik*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, p. 15.

prefix, *ha-* or *ḥa-*, is invariably realized as *ʿa-*. In Educated Cairene Arabic, on the other hand, voicing of gutturals occurs only as a result of assimilation, when the target is immediately followed by /ʿ/, e.g. *yuḳʻud ~ yuʻʻud* ‘he stays’.³⁰

(8) Guttural lenition

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
<i>ya laʻwi</i>	<i>ya lahwi</i>	‘oh my god!’
<i>ʻāti l-filūs</i>	<i>hāti l-filūs</i>	‘hand me the money’
<i>ʻašīdit šīʻr</i>	<i>qāšīdit šīʻr</i>	‘a poem’
<i>ʻadd-i yimsaḥ</i>	<i>ḥadd-i yimsaḥ</i>	‘someone wipes’
<i>ʻa-tur_quṣi</i>	<i>ḥa-tur_quṣi</i>	‘you’ll dance’
<i>ana ʻāgi</i>	<i>ana ḥāgi</i>	‘I’ll come’

Another interesting aspect is metathesis: a consonant-interchange process found optionally in such ECA words as *baṭamān ~ baṭramān* ‘jam glass’, *laḥbaṭ ~ ḥalbaṭ* ‘he confused’, *yilʻan ~ yinʻal* ‘he curses’, as well as some substandard examples like *faylasūf ~ faḥyasūf* ‘philosopher’, *ritl ~ litr* ‘liter’, *arānib ~ anārib* ‘rabbits’.³¹ Il-Limbi, however, expands metathesis to a large number of ECA and foreign words which he struggles with, as exemplified in (9). Here again, humorous puns are “accidentally” generated when, e.g. instead of *tilḥa_qu*, we hear *tiḥla_qu* which means both to shave and to stand up someone; or instead of *rubʻ-i gnē* ‘a quarter of a pound’, we hear *ruʻb-i gnē* ‘terror of a pound’, precisely as we watch il-Limbi bullying the young boy in the opening scene of *il-Limbi 8 Gīgā*. Although such forms often exist side by side with non-metathesized forms, production of the metathesized version of a loanword is still perceived as a marker of poor education and lower status in the social hierarchy.³² It appears, therefore, that il-Limbi’s background is enhanced by playing the metathesis card.

(9) Consonant metathesis

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
<i>bas-muhandiš</i>	<i>baš-muhandis</i>	‘chief engineer (title)’
<i>fardit ik-kawiš</i>	<i>fardit ik-kawitš</i>	‘the car tire’
<i>it-talawittāt di</i>	<i>it-tawalittāt di</i>	‘these toilets’
<i>sandawitšāt</i>	<i>sandawitšāt</i>	‘sandwiches’
<i>ʻašān tiḥla_qu</i>	<i>ʻašān tilḥa_qu</i>	‘to have time’
<i>mufaʻga tanya</i>	<i>mufagʻa tanya</i>	‘another surprise’
<i>isk-i brissu</i>	<i>iks-i brissu</i>	‘espresso’
<i>ruʻb-i gnē</i>	<i>rubʻ-i gnē</i>	‘a quarter of a pound’
<i>tiḥwid</i>	<i>tiwlid</i>	‘gives birth’

Finally, il-Limbi exhibits a few cases of full consonant harmony: long-distance copying of a consonant. These are, once again, words from ECA or foreign origin, which he struggles to pronounce. The first two examples in (10) are typical in vulgar speech, whereas *ʻabbād iš-šams* ‘sunflower’ is humorously transformed into *ʻaddād iš-šams* ‘sun meter’.

³⁰ Watson, *The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic*, p. 246.

³¹ See Woidich, *Das Kairenisch-Arabisches*, p. 20.

³² See Hafez, “Phonological and Morphological Integration”.

(10) Consonant harmony

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
<i>fi-l-muštašfa</i>	<i>fi-l-mustašfa</i>	'at the hospital'
<i>il-muštašarīn</i>	<i>il-mustašarīn</i>	'the judges'
<i>zatūn kalaṭāṭa</i>	<i>zatūn kalamāṭa</i>	'Kalamata olives'
'addād iṣ-šams	'abbād iṣ-šams	'sunflower'

Overall, several of the consonant patterns above – *e.g.* sibilant voicing and metathesis – appear to be overgeneralizations of existing ECA patterns. This phonological affinity will invite the audience to form semi-conscious rules for those patterns, the overapplication of which becomes a major source of humor in the performance. On the other hand, patterns such as consonant harmony and guttural lenition appear to be special Limbi Arabic features, or manifestations of illiterate speech. It is argued that speakers of this register tend to distance themselves from the elite classes by (consciously or subconsciously) insisting on features such as full velarization of /t, d, ʃ, z/, which are shifting toward their non-velarized cognates in ECA.³³ Il-Limbi's consonant articulations seem to fall along these lines. Let us now consider whether vowels display any special patterns.

4. Vowel Patterns

The most obvious is vowel raising, which targets a non-final short low vowel /a/ followed by another /a/ or /ā/, and produces a high front /i/ (11). The result is often disharmonic; however, raising may occur multiple times in the same word leading to harmony, as in *mirkiz* and *ligliga*. It is also noteworthy that the preceding consonant seems to play a role, since we notice frequent raising after labial or alveolar consonants, and less after back (velar or guttural) consonants.

(11) Vowel raising

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
<i>šāyif il-wigāha</i>	<i>šāyif il-wagāha</i>	'see the elegance?'
<i>fi-l-ḥilāwa</i>	<i>fi-l-ḥalāwa</i>	'sweet, pleasant'
<i>silāmu 'alēku</i>	<i>salāmu 'alēku</i>	'peace be upon you!'
<i>kull-i fitā</i>	<i>kull-i fatā</i>	'every girl'
<i>wilād ḥilāl</i>	<i>wilād ḥalāl</i>	'decent people'
<i>mihman kān</i>	<i>mahman kān</i>	'whatever it was'
<i>mirkiz šibāb</i>	<i>markaz šabāb</i>	'youth center'
<i>ē ligliga di</i>	<i>ē laglaga di</i>	'what is a stutter?'
<i>id-dunya diyya_qa</i>	<i>id-dunya dayya_qa</i>	'it is a small world'
<i>ḥimas da_qāyi'</i>	<i>ḥamas da_qāyi'</i>	'five minutes'
<i>yī_qfil il-musilsil</i>	<i>yī_qfil il-musalsal</i>	'close the TV series'
<i>fi-l-'iṣwa'iyyāt</i>	<i>fi-l-'ašwa'iyyāt</i>	'in the slums'
<i>fakrik mu'addiba</i>	<i>fakrik mu'addaba</i>	'believed you were decent'

³³ Badawī, *Mustawayāt al-'arabiyya*, p. 217.

Occasionally we find raising when the target /a/ is followed by /ū/, as in *miḥmūl* ‘cell phone’ and *mibsūt* ‘content’; and in monosyllabic words with two consonants in the coda, such as *sib* ‘lion’ and *nifs* ‘self’. In the latter case, it is possible that il-Limbi is misapplying a pattern by which some words with similar syllable structure have /a/ as the stem vowel in ECA and /i/ in MSA, e.g. *malḥ* vs. *milḥ* ‘salt’. Hence, if replacing /a/ with /i/ here is simply a misguided imitation of MSA, then we are dealing with correspondence rules that connect higher and lower registers of Arabic. These rules, which native speakers are aware of, are applied erroneously by illiterate speakers (often in inappropriate contexts); and their deliberate misapplication by comedians produces a funny effect for those who know “better”. But since this is hard to establish with any certainty, we will simply describe the synchronic patterns that we observe.

It is the author’s impression that the /a/-to-/i/ shift is an idiosyncrasy of *baladī* speech, more specifically of illiterate female speakers. Although there are no studies (of which I am aware) that mention this feature, an example from Egyptian film discourse is actress Salwā Muḥammad ‘Alī’s trademark vocative *yā ‘Ilā*, for ‘*Alā*’, in *Gā’anā l-Bayān al-Tālī* ‘We have just received the following communiqué’.³⁴ In the case of il-Limbi, the shift can be regarded as a caricature feature of a character that occasionally displays feminine traits and gestures, as it has been pointed out.³⁵

The second major pattern is vowel harmony, which also targets a non-final short /a/ followed by /i, ī/ or /u, ū/, and gives a high front /i/ or /u/, respectively. In other words, the quality of the high vowel will determine the outcome of harmony, as shown in (12a-b). Sometimes the output will overlap with an existing word creating puns; as in the first example, where il-Limbi modifies *gamīl* ‘beautiful’ into *gimīl* which happens to mean ‘favor’. It appears that the long vowels /ī/ and /ū/ are the more likely triggers of harmony, but there are also instances where a long mid /ē/ causes two preceding /a/s to become /i/s (12c).

(12) Vowel harmony

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
a. <i>bi-š-šakl ig-gimīl da</i>	<i>bi-š-šakl ig-gamīl da</i>	‘in this beautiful manner’
<i>ig-girīma lā tufīd</i>	<i>ig-garīma lā tufīd</i>	‘crime ends badly’
<i>il-laḥṣa is-sīda</i>	<i>il-laḥṣa is-saīda</i>	‘the happy moment’
<i>kida tiṣṣarīban</i>	<i>kida taṣṣarīban</i>	‘approximately like this’
<i>‘āyiz tiḡīl</i>	<i>‘āyiz taḡīl</i>	‘I want an adjournment’
<i>il-muttaham birī</i>	<i>il-muttaham barī</i>	‘the suspect is innocent’
<i>fi kimīn</i>	<i>fi kamīn</i>	‘in an ambush’
<i>ya ḥibībi</i>	<i>ya ḥabībi</i>	‘my dear’
<i>bidayt il-ḥilīqa</i>	<i>bidayt il-ḥalīqa</i>	‘the dawn of creation’
<i>lilt il-ḥimīs</i>	<i>lilt il-ḥamīs</i>	‘Thursday night’
<i>‘a š-širīḥa</i>	<i>‘a š-šarīḥa</i>	‘on the chip’
<i>mu’tṭīr da</i>	<i>mu’aṭṭīr da</i>	‘is this a freshener?’
<i>fiḍillu yumēn</i>	<i>faḍillu yumēn</i>	‘had two days left’
<i>bini admīn</i>	<i>bani admīn</i>	‘people, sons of Adam’

³⁴ Dir. Sa‘īd Ḥāmid, screenplay Muḥammad Amīn, 2001.

³⁵ van Eynde, Koen. 2014. *Men in the Picture: Representations of Men and Masculinities in Egyptian Cinema since 1952*. PhD. dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

b. <i>nufūḥ tāni</i>	<i>naḥūḥ tāni</i>	‘another crown of the head’
<i>miḥallif dubdūb</i>	<i>miḥallif dabdūb</i>	‘has a teddy-bear child’
<i>ṣurṣūr il-widn</i>	<i>ṣarṣūr il-widn</i>	‘the earlobe’
‘and <i>il-muṣūra</i>	‘and <i>il-maṣūra</i>	‘next to the pipe’
<i>zayy il-ḥurṣūf</i>	<i>zayy il-ḥarṣūf</i>	‘like artichoke’
<i>tuḥulluf ‘aqli</i>	<i>taḥalluf ‘aqli</i>	‘mental retardation’
<i>hiyya di t-tugruba</i>	<i>hiyya di t-tagruba</i>	‘is this the experiment?’
c. <i>fi-k-kibinē</i>	<i>fi-k-kabanē</i>	‘in the toilet’
<i>fi ẓarf-i sinitēn</i>	<i>fi ẓarf-i sanatēn</i>	‘within two years’

The closest ECA gets to vowel harmony is a tendency in loanword adaptation whereby one vowel is altered to match another, thus simplifying the pronunciation, *e.g.* in *alamunyum* ‘aluminum’ and *ṣufunīra* ‘chiffonier’.³⁶ We may also spot harmony if we compare Cairene Arabic words like *kitīr* ‘many’ and *bilīla* ‘wheat groats’ with their Upper Egyptian counterparts *katīr* ‘many’ and *balīla*.³⁷ So, one hypothesis is that harmony is a Cairene feature which il-Limbi exaggerates to emphasize his “urban-ness”. Another is that the replacement of /a/ with /i/ or /u/ is in imitation of MSA, considering that we find words where the vowel /a/ in ECA corresponds to /i/ or /u/ in MSA, *e.g.* *qassīs* vs. *qissīs* ‘church minister’ and *mathaf* vs. *muthaf* ‘museum’. This brings us back to the correspondence rules between ECA and MSA which the comedian manipulates, by way of misapplication, to create humor. Both interpretations are sound and defensible, but I do not opt for a specific one here.

Lastly, three minor patterns are worth mentioning. The first is labialization of short /a/ to /u/. In ECA, short /i/ stem vowels may surface as /u/ before a labio-velar glide /w/;³⁸ Il-Limbi seems to generalize this rule to underlying /a/ as well (13a). The second pattern is vowel disharmony. This occurs when a word that exhibits *i-i* or *u-u* vowel harmony changes to the *i-a* or *u-a* pattern instead. As shown in (13b), disharmony appears in a few ECA or foreign words that il-Limbi “wants to” mispronounce. The third is that word-final /i/ and /ē/ are phonetically centralized, almost indiscriminately; but these are clearly allophonic variants, rather than new phonemes.

(13) Labialization of /a/ and vowel disharmony

Limbi Arabic	ECA cognate	Gloss
a. <i>is-suwwāq da</i>	<i>is-sawwāq da</i>	‘this chauffeur’
<i>ana-l-buwwāb</i>	<i>ana-l-bawwāb</i>	‘I’m the doorman’
b. <i>id-dastūr iq-ginā’i</i>	<i>id-dustūr iq-ginā’i</i>	‘the criminal law’
<i>bi-mukalmit tilafōn</i>	<i>bi-mukalmit tilifōn</i>	‘with a phone call’

So just like the consonant patterns, most vowel patterns can also be viewed as over-applications of correspondence rules between two different, but similar varieties of Arabic. This usage has a rather comical feel to it.

³⁶ See Hafez, “Phonological and Morphological Integration”.

³⁷ Woidich, Manfred. 1980. “Das Ägyptisch-arabische”, in *Handbuch der arabischen Dialekte*, eds. Wolfdietrich Fischer and Otto Jastrow. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, p. 207-229.

³⁸ Youssef, Islam. 2013. “Labialization in Cairene Arabic”, *Nordlyd* 40, p. 359-368.

5. Conclusion

Il-Limbi's link to Egyptian popular culture is established primarily through language. The linguistic code that materialized in the films can be perceived in one of two ways: one as an over-adaptation of correspondence rules which connect ECA with higher or lower registers of Egyptian Arabic; the other as a manifestation of the "street vernacular" spoken by the economically and socially inferior classes in inner-city slums. This paper has shown that il-Limbi's phonological system is grounded in both. Features that can be traced back to ECA include voicing of sibilants, consonant mutation, metathesis, and vowel harmony; while features of illiterate vernacular include /k/ for /q/, guttural lenition, consonant harmony, and vowel raising. The selection and combination of these features is, however, unique; and on that account, the label "Limbi Arabic" is warranted.

An important ingredient of this code is the almost-grotesque adaption of loanwords. This is done frequently when il-Limbi – a man with no education and low socioeconomic status – feigns to be of a higher class, unsuccessfully. Poorly-affected social mobility in those situations is rendered "through a shift in the performance of the urban vernacular and a contrivance of English and classical Arabic",³⁹ and can be interpreted as a mockery of social class conventions. On the surface level, we may attribute the characteristic mispronunciation of loanwords in this register to the consequences of its speakers' illiteracy: the perceptual and articulatory challenges of new sounds and patterns, low frequency of the input, and lack of a visual or printed mental representation thereof.⁴⁰ And with little to help them produce the authentic pronunciation of a word, they fall back on similar words or patterns in their native speech. Il-Limbi is no exception; he simply inflicts his streetwise lexicon and eccentric phonological system on those loanwords.

The social significance of il-Limbi cannot be overestimated, and this naturally extends to his language. For the popular audience, il-Limbi's linguistic distortions are material for laughter and mockery of the social class system and its hypocrisies; that is to say, they will laugh with il-Limbi at the expense of the norm. A large chunk of the audience will indeed identify with him, for obvious reasons. Il-Limbi is not just an endearing bully; he also epitomizes the culture of the oppressed, excluded classes in traditional quarters, and underlines their social and economic concerns. However, in order to laugh with the character, the viewer needs to be conscious of the distance and disparity between the "correct" form and the *baladī* or, in the case of il-Limbi, the absurdly distant form. In other words, the audience is also laughing with the norm at the expense of il-Limbi. Following Pierre Bourdieu, such "transgression of official norms" in pop culture, broadly speaking, both laughs at and reenacts the linguistic norms.⁴¹

The above complexities aside, il-Limbi's character has been so influential in the Egyptian context that various aspects of his bizarre idiolect – of both pronunciation and lexicon – have become part of everyday speech. For example, expressions like *'āt filūs* 'give me money' or *ē il-wiliyya di* 'what hell of a woman!' have been excerpted and transformed into run-of-the-mill phrases used by all social classes, albeit comically sometimes. Only time, of course, will tell

³⁹ Hamam, "Disarticulating Arab Popular Culture", p. 187.

⁴⁰ See Badawī, *Mustawayāt al-'arabiyya*, p. 218-219.

⁴¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 2001. *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*. Paris, Seuil.

whether aspects of Limbi Arabic will continue to be mimicked and accepted into Egyptian Arabic, but the fact remains that Muḥammad Sa'd's comedies have by now "meted out a part for themselves in Egypt's contemporary popular culture".⁴² And I hope that my investigation of Limbi Arabic in this article has provided useful insights into the social characterization of speech in Egyptian pop culture productions, starting with phonology – a characterization which echoes and caricatures actual representations of language in contemporary Egypt.

⁴² van Eynde, *Men in the Picture*, p. 197.